DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 417 CG 014 937

AUTHOR Darby, Bruce W.; Schlenker, Barry R.
TITLE The Use of Apologies in Social Predicaments.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Mental Health (DHEW), Rockville, Md.; National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Sep 80
GRANT NIMH-K02-MH00183; NSF-BNS-77-08182
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (88th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, September 1-5, 1980). Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; *Interpersonal Competence; Interpersonal Relationship; Locus of Control; Personality Traits; *Responses; *Responsibility; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Social Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Apologies

ABSTRACT

Apologies are admissions of blameworthiness for an undesirable event and allow actors to try to obtain a pardon from the audience. In an investigation of the uses and forms of apologies, 120 subjects participated in a role-play study where they imagined themselves to be central characters who bumped into a "victim." Apologies were used in a ritualized form, i.e., saying "Pardon me" and then going about one's business, when the consequences of the event were minor. As the consequences became more negative, subjects employed an increasing number of apology components, i.e., saying they were sorry, expressing remorse, and offering to help the victim. When high consequences and high responsibility coexisted, subjects were most likely to employ self-castigation and directly request forgiveness. Results indicated that as the severity of a predicament increased, so did the use of nonritualized apologies and the number of components employed in apologies. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED198417

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE USE OF APOLOGIES IN SOCIAL PREDICAMENTS

Bruce W. Darby and Barry R. Schlenker
University of Florida

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Bruce W. Darby

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 014937

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, September, 1980.

The Use of Apologies in Social Predicaments

Bruce W. Darby and Barry R. Schlenker

University of Florida

Problem. Social predicaments are situations in which events cast "undesired aspersions on the lineage, character, conduct, skills, or motives of an actor," and range from minor embarrassing incidents to major transgressions (Schlenker, 1980). When predicaments occur, actors become motivated to restore face and protect themselves against the possible negative repercussions (e.g., being evaluated negatively and punished by onlookers). One of the major remedial tactics that can be employed by actors for this purpose is the apology. In an apology, actors admit blameworthiness for the undesirable event, but attempt to obtain a pardon from the audience by convincing the latter that the "event should not be considered a fair representation of what the actor is 'really like' as a person" (Schlenker, 1980). Surprisingly, given the importance of apologies in social life, virtually no research has been conducted to examine the conditions under which they are used and the elements that they contain.

Apologies can contain a number of components, and can range from a perfunctory "Pardon me" used in a ritualistic manner, to a more full blown expression that might include: (a) expressions of remorse, sorrow, embarrassment, etc., to indicate the actor knows he/she has transgressed and feels badly about it, (b) self-castigation, in which the actor rejects the inappropriate conduct and disparages the "bad" self that misbehaved, (c) offers to help the injured party, thus volunteering restitution, and (d) direct attempts to obtain forgiveness, such as saying "Please forgive me" (Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980). Through these components, an apology can attempt to redress the damage that has been done, extends a promise of more

desirable conduct in the future, and seeks a pardon for the actor.

According to Schlenker (1980), predicaments increase in magnitude as the consequences of the event increase (e.g., it is worse to bump into someone and cause them serious harm than to bump into them lightly) and as the actor's responsibility for the event increases (e.g., it is worse to bump into someone through carelessness than to be pushed into him by a third party). It is hypothesized that when the consequences of a predicament are minor, people should employ apologies in a ritualized fashion, without the extra elements noted above. These apology rituals allow minor predicaments to be passed over quickly and forgotten by the interactants.

However, as the consequences of a predicament increase, and as the actor's responsibility for the event increases, the potential negative repercussions to the actor are greater and more extensive remedial action is required. Admitting blame and then attempting to obtain forgiveness is most necessary when the actor appears to be guilty of producing serious negative consequences. Hence, it is hypothesized that full blown expressions of apologies will be most likely to occur when high responsibility and high consequences coexist. The present experiment employed a role-play technique to test these hypotheses.

Subjects. One hundred twenty (60 male and 60 female) introductory psychology students participated in partial fulfillment of a course research requirement.

Procedure. Two written scenarios depicted a central character and a "victim" against whom the central character had transgressed. In one scenario, the central character was walking through a shopping mall and bumped into the victim; in the second scenario, the central character was walking between classes at school and bumped into the victim. The degree to which the central character was responsible for the transgression (low or high guilt) and the magnitude of the consequences (low, medium, or high) were systematically mani-

pulated within each scenario. In the low guilt condition, the central character was paying attention while walking but was knocked from behind by a third person, thus bumping into the victim. In the high guilt condition, the central character was walking along inattentively and didn't notice the victim, bumping into the latter. Cross-cutting this manipulation, the scenarios depicted the victim as either: being bumped lightly on the arm by the central character (low consequences), being knocked to the ground, startled but unhurt (medium consequences), or being knocked to the ground, hurting his/her arm and moaning with pain (high consequences). In all cases, the victim then looked at the central character.

Each subject was given a booklet that contained instructions and the two scenarios that represented the same guilt and consequences combination. The instructions asked subjects to "imagine yourself in the place of the central character" in each scenario. After reading each, they were told to answer the questions below it, and that their answers should reflect how they would act if they were the central character. Seven pairs of items, each followed by 13-point scales, assessed components of apologies (e.g., saying "I'm sorry, offering to help, expressing remorse, employing self-castigation). The first item in each pair asked how likely the subject was to engage in the behavior (e.g., how likely the subject would be to express remorse) and the second item asked how much the subject would stress or emphasize the behavior (e.g., how much remorse the subject would express). Since each pair of items was always significantly correlated (average correlation = +.71) and produced the same pattern of results, only the first item in each pair will be reported below.

An additional 20 subjects assessed the effectiveness of the manipulations contained in the scenarios. They read all of the scenarios and rated them for

how responsible the central character was for causing the event and how much harm the central character did to the other person. As desired, they believed the central character was more responsible in the high than low guilt condition (Ms = 9.1 and 2.3, respectively, $p < .001$), and produced more harm as the consequences increased (Ms = 1.6, 4.0, and 6.7, $p < .001$, each mean differed from the others).

Results.[2] Initial analyses showed that neither scenario type nor sex of subjects affected responses, so these factors were dropped from the analyses reported below. Responses on each dependent variable therefore represent an average score obtained from the two comparable scenarios.

The ritualized aspect of apologies was assessed through an item that asked subjects how likely they would be "to say, 'Pardon me,' to the other person and then walk away without doing or saying anything else." A consequences main effect, $p < .01$, and a guilt by consequences interaction, $p < .05$, were revealed on the item (see Table 1). As predicted, subjects used the ritualized form only when consequences were low. Further, given low consequences, they were more likely to use it when they were more rather than less guilty.

Main effects of consequences were obtained on three items that assessed basic elements of apologies (all $ps < .001$). These included how likely subjects were to: (a) "say to the other person, 'I'm sorry,'" (b) "express feelings of remorse about the situation...for example, you might say, 'I feel so badly about this,'" and (c) "offer to help the other person in some way." In each case, subjects were less likely to use these components of apologies when the consequences were low rather than medium or high (see Table 2).

The predicted guilt by consequences interactions, $ps < .05$, were obtained on two elements of apologies that involved the clearest admissions of self blame: (a) saying "something to castigate yourself (i.e., put yourself down)

about the situation...for example, you might say, 'How stupid of me' or 'I feel foolish'" and (b) saying "something to try to get the other person to forgive you." As shown in Table 1, consequences had an effect only in the high guilt condition, $p < .05$; given high guilt, the greater the consequences, the more subjects stated they would castigate themselves and ask for forgiveness.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Conclusions. The results supported the major hypotheses. When the consequences of a predicament are minimal, people appear to use the ritualized form of an apology, employing a hasty "Pardon me" or comparable phrase and going on their way. Interestingly, subjects stated they would be even more likely to use the ritualized form when they were more responsible for the insignificant consequences.

In contrast, more elaborate components of apologies were employed when the consequences of the predicament were larger. As consequences increased, people said they were more likely to say they were sorry, express remorse, and offer to help the victim. Guilt by consequences interactions were not obtained on these items, perhaps because these components are less directly tied to admissions of high guilt in many situations; following accidents, one can easily express being sorry and remorseful, and help the victim (e.g., assisting him/her to his/her feet). The predicted guilt by consequences interactions were obtained on two components that involved the most straightforward admission of self-involvement and blame: castigating oneself and trying to obtain forgiveness. The confluence of high guilt and high consequences generated the most

likely use of these components. Taken together, these results support the hypothesis that the severity of a predicament is directly related to both the use of nonritualized apologies and the number of components employed in apologies.

It should be kept in mind that the present results represent data obtained from a role-play situation. However, prior results indicate that role-play studies can effectively reproduce actual behavior in predicaments (e.g., Mixon, 1974), and the creation of real predicaments for subjects in laboratory or field settings raises numerous ethical questions. Consequently, role-play studies provide a useful initial testing ground for hypotheses about social behavior in predicaments, and the procedure provided strong support for hypotheses about how apologies are used.

Footnotes

1. The present study was supported in part by a Research Scientist Development Award (#K02 MH00183) from NIMH and National Science Foundation grant #BNS 77-08182.

2. After finishing the scenarios, subjects completed four personality measures, including assessments of self-esteem, internal-external control, the need for social approval, and self-monitoring. Several interesting results were obtained when these variables were included as factors in analyses. For instance, as compared with high self-esteem subjects, those with low self-esteem were more likely to use ritualistic apologies, employ self-castigation, and express remorse when guilt was low, $ps < .05$. Space limitations prohibit a more complete description of these results here, although they will be mentioned, if time permits, in a paper session or, preferably, poster session.

References

Goffman, E. Relations in public. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971.

Mixon, D. If you won't deceive, what can you do? In N. Armistead (ed.), Reconstructing social psychology. Baltimore: Penguin, 1974. Pp. 72-85.

Schlenker, B. R. Impression management: The self-concept, social identity, and interpersonal relations. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1980.

Table 1

Effects of Guilt and Consequences on Apology Components

Apology Component and Guilt Condition	Consequences		
	Low	Medium	High
Ritualistic "Pardon Me"			
Low Guilt	8.1_{abc}	2.5_{b}	2.3_{c}
High Guilt	10.3_{ade}	1.7_{d}	1.7_{e}
Self-Castigation			
Low Guilt	3.9	3.2_{b}	3.6_{c}
High Guilt	3.4_{a}	5.5_{b}	6.2_{ac}
Attempts at Forgiveness			
Low Guilt	4.5	5.8	4.7_{c}
High Guilt	3.3_{ab}	6.7_{a}	7.6_{bc}

Note. Higher means indicate a greater likelihood of using the component. Within each component, means with a common subscript represent orthogonal comparisons that differ by at least $p < .05$.

Table 2

Effects of Consequences on Apology Components

Apology Component	Consequences		
	Low	Medium	High
Saying "I'm sorry"	11.0_{ab}	12.3_{a}	12.3_{b}
Expressing Remorse	3.9_{ab}	7.2_{a}	9.1_{b}
Offering to Help	5.3_{ab}	11.3_{a}	11.6_{b}

Note. Higher means indicate a greater likelihood of using the component. Within each row, means with a common subscript differ by at least $p < .05$.